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ANIMAL TALES OF THE ESKIMO.¹

ONE of the striking features of the mythology and tales of the North American Indians is the important part which is played therein by animals. The share occupied by animals varies among different tribes, being at times concentrated on a few animals, at times distributed among a number. Sometimes animals occur rather infrequently; at others, the larger part of a mythology is concerned primarily with them. On the whole, we can state that it is a universal characteristic of North American Indian tales to possess a considerable animal element.

There is another feature besides the frequency of animals. This is the manner in which the animals are conceived of. Nearly always they seem to be regarded as almost human. They speak, they think, like men. Sometimes, indeed, they would seem to be merely men with names of animals; sometimes they appear to be men who have assumed the shape of beasts, but at others they are originally animals who later become men; and sometimes, in spite of human reason and power of speech, they clearly are and remain animals in physical form. In this case, again, different tribes differ; but we shall not be far from the truth when we say that, for the North American Indian in general, there was a time when men and animals were not different, but alike. Between them he draws no line in his mythology. As it has been put, "there is to the Indian no essential distinction between man and animal" (Von den Steinen, "*Naturvölker Zentral Braziliens*," 1894, p. 351).

We find, then, animals to be frequent in Indian mythology, and we find a peculiarly human conception of them. When we turn to the tales of the Eskimo, we find a striking difference. The animals are almost absent.

Of course there are frequent casual references to animals in Eskimo tales which do not in the least invalidate this statement; for we are now dealing, not with animals appearing like, for instance, houses or boats, as mere accessories in the stories, but with animals that are the agents or characters, the personages, of the tales. For this reason we must also exclude from our present consideration a body of incidents telling of the origin of animals. We are told by the Eskimo that a woman who was drowned turned into a narwhal, her twisted tuft of hair becoming the twisted tusk of the animal (Rink, "*Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo*," p. 99). We hear that an excitable man calling for his blanket, thus constantly shouting the

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word "kak," became a raven (Turner, "The Hudson Bay Eskimo," Eleventh Ann. Report Bureau of Ethn. p. 262). A boy who was abused on account of his long ears ran away and became a hare (Turner, p. 263). This sort of incident is very frequent as a conclusion to Eskimo tales; and further it reminds of Indian tales, in that at first sight it seems to obliterate the difference between man and animal. But as in all these cases we do not have the animal as *agent* in any way, and in fact the transformation seems to be regarded as the act that *ends* the human qualities of the transformed, we can omit this class of apparent animal tales. There is the more reason for this as in many cases the transformation at the end of the story has no connection at all with the preceding events, — is a mere gratuitous addition. (Compare Rink, p. 232, and Boas, "The Central Eskimo," p. 639, with Turner, "Origin of the Guillemots," p. 262.)

If, accordingly, we omit these kinds of animal incidents, we find the animal tales proper of the Eskimo to be very few. Eskimo mythology is, compared with Indian, very strongly human. Beside a single story that is found in the identical form over a large part of western North America, and is therefore as likely as not of Indian origin, — and three or four others that are all rather scant, — the tales of the Eskimo that attribute human qualities to animals, and have animals as their characters, belong clearly to two naturally sharply defined groups. In the first group the central incident is the marriage between a human being and an animal. The tales of the second group resemble the ordinary European beast-fable that we are familiar with, and are all remarkable for their brevity.

The marriage between an animal and a human being, especially a woman, seems to be a favorite *motif* in Eskimo mythology. It is found no less than seven times, and the animals vary from a shark to the petrel, from a huge reptile to a dog. To a certain extent, these animals seem endowed with human faculties: most of them speak; and a few times we are told that they had assumed the shape of men. But on the whole the opposite idea of *contrast* between man and beast, and of essential difference between them, seems to have been uppermost in the mind of the Eskimo narrators. To them the animals are animals, as is shown by the fact that, in all cases where there is any offspring consequent upon the union, the young are animals. Therefore there is in this group of stories little real resemblance with the average Indian tale containing animals. In both, animals are agents: but the Indian forgets, ignores the distinction between animal and man; the Eskimo tends to emphasize it.

The other group consists of about twenty very short stories. The

majority of these are composed of a few bits of dialogue between two animals, sometimes accompanied, and sometimes not, by a little action, — an incident or two. In others the dialogue is between a man and one or more animals. A few examples will illustrate.

The following is from East Greenland, and has not been translated into English: There were once a Duck and a Ptarmigan which had the shape of men. When the Duck came to the shore, he said to the Ptarmigan, "Why do you go about with heavy stockings in midsummer?" The Ptarmigan answered, "Why do you go about with *ituartit* in the middle of summer?" Thereat the Duck became angry, and said that they should wrestle. Then they took hold of each other and began to wrestle. The Duck dragged the Ptarmigan to the shore, and threw him out into the water. They continued to wrestle in the water, until they got under the surface. Here the Ptarmigan tore the Duck's breast so that he killed him. The Ptarmigan flew ashore and cried for joy, "Kakerkaka!" (Holm, "Sagn og Fortaellinger fra Angmagsalik," p. 83.)

From Baffin Land: The Owl said to the Snowbird, "They say that you have nothing to pick your teeth with." The Snowbird replied, "And your throat is so wide that one can look right through it." (Boas, "Journal of American Folk-Lore," x. 110.)

From Baffin Land: The Lemming said, "Fox, Fox! do you always run along the beach? Are you looking for something to eat?" The Fox answered, "What will he, with his short legs, with his bit of a body? Who is that round thing, that small-small-legged one?" (Rink and Boas, "Journal of American Folk-Lore," ii. 129.)

The following, which I have obtained from the party of Smith Sound Eskimo who were in this country last winter, are, I believe, new. A small Snowbird was crying. The Raven, who met her, asked her why she wept. She said, "I am crying for my husband, because he has been away so long a time. He went away to look for food for me, and has not come back." The Raven assured her that her husband was dead; he himself had seen him drown. "But I will marry you," he said. "You can sleep here under my armpit. Take me for a husband. I have a pretty bill; I have a pretty chin; I have good enough nostrils and eyes; my wings are good and large, and so are my whiskers." But the little Snowbird said, "I don't want you for my husband."

A Raven flew by, above a person, carrying something in his beak. "What have you in your beak, Raven?" the person asked. "A man's thigh bone," the Raven answered. "I eat it because I like it. I shall swallow it."

Another tale tells of the attack the swordfish made upon the wal-

rus, cutting off its flippers. The walrus stabbed him in the head with its tusks, and the swordfish swam off.

(In some of these tales that come from Greenland, it is explained that the man who converses with the animals sees them as persons, recognizing them in their true form only as they disappear. In the East Greenland tale given above, however, we clearly have the characteristic Indian idea of beings at once men and animals. At the opening, the Duck and the Ptarmigan are expressly stated to have had the form of men; at the close, we find the Ptarmigan in the animal act of flying.)

These examples characterize sufficiently the Eskimo animal tales proper. They are all very much alike, and clearly form a class by themselves which is distinct from the ordinary Eskimo tale. They are short, scant, and trivial. The action is insignificant, often absent. The short speeches, which are often sung, are the nucleus of the whole. They are in the form of repartee, and are generally humorous, as are at times the situations. The characters are animals of all kinds,—mammals, birds, sea-mammals, fishes; but birds occur most frequently, and of these most often the raven. On the whole, they are suggestive of our European beast fables.

The relation of these tales to the animal tales of the Indians is now clear. It is evidently a relation chiefly of dissimilarity. True, the characteristic feature of the latter—the fact that animals are not distinguished from men—we see that the Eskimo tales possess also. In fact I do not wish to be understood to say that the dissimilarity is complete or absolute, or even radical. On the contrary, it is important to note that the essential feature of the Indian animal tales is found among the Eskimo. There is no absolute break between the two mythologies. Indeed, in view of the fact that the two races are contiguous for several thousand miles, it would be strange if there were such a complete and radical difference.

Nevertheless, that there is a difference, and a great difference, is indubitable. The mere paucity and brevity of the Eskimo beast fable must differentiate it from the Indian animal tale. For instance, even if we add to these beast fables the stories of the first-mentioned group,—those dealing with the marriage of men and animals,—we have a total of only thirty. As the whole number of separate Eskimo tales is about 380, it is evident that less than eight per cent. of Eskimo tales distinctly contain an animal element. What the proportion among Indian tales may be, I cannot say; but it is without doubt scarcely ever so low as this, while frequently it reaches one half. The scantiness of the Eskimo animal element is still more obvious when we find that the twenty tales in which it appears could all be printed in a few pages, and constitute quantita-

tively barely more than one one-hundredth of the Eskimo traditions we possess (about seven or eight ordinary octavo pages out of 550). This scantiness necessarily results in, or is the result of, a treatment very different from that which the animal element receives in Indian mythologies.

The difference is most apparent — and this consideration may throw some light on the causes of the difference — when we remember that among Indian tribes there is almost always more or less association of animals with cosmogonies. The creator, the world-preserver, the transformer, the culture-hero, whether united into one person or not, are universal figures in Indian mythologies; and they are often conceived as animals. The hare (Algonquin), the raven (all the North Pacific coast tribes), the spider (Pueblo), the coyote (Rocky Mountain region), are familiar examples. And even when these characters are men, many of their dealings are with animals. Witness the widespread story of the diving of various animals in order to reproduce the earth after the flood. In fact, the truth of this contention is so obvious and so widely recognized as to need no further evidence. Throughout North America, animals contribute to cosmogony.

Equally universal and well-known is the association of animals with the system of totemism, to which, in fact, they contribute the foundation.

Among the Eskimo, however, totemism is totally wanting. More than that, their cosmogonical ideas are exceedingly rudimentary. The most thorough investigations seem to show that, while the Eskimo may have a very definite idea of the world as it is at present, they practically do not conceive of its origin, or the origin of its parts. Perhaps the only strictly cosmogonical myth of the Eskimo is that relating to the origin of the sun and moon, and that is purely human. What else there is — and it is scanty and disconnected — occurs almost altogether among the small group of animal stories mentioned above, — those of marriages of men and animals. It seems, accordingly, as if there were some causal connection here, as if the absence of totemism, the scantiness of cosmogonical notions, and the scarcity of animal tales were all related; just as the greater development of these things among the Indians would seem to be due to one cause or one set of causes. Corroborating this view is the fact that, among a western Eskimo tribe, our information as to which appears to reveal the presence (due perhaps to Indian influence) of a more definite cosmogony than that possessed by other tribes, we find animals taking a part in the cosmogonical acts. (Petitot, "*Vocabulaire Français-Esquimau, Dialecte des Tchiglit*," pp. xxiv., xxxiv. Note also the introduction of animals into the sun

and moon myth in Greenland: Rink, "Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo," p. 236.)

At any rate, it is clear that the animal personage of the Eskimo beast fable, who contents himself with bandying repartee with one of his brethren, is a very different character from the American Indian's coyote, or raven, or hare, who makes, or liberates, or visits the sun, or re-creates the world. At bottom, originally, they may have been alike; they still have a distinct point of resemblance in their common semi-human, semi-animal qualities. But on the whole there is a constant and marked difference between Eskimo and Indian tales and myths, not only in the frequency of occurrence, but in the treatment and nature, of their animal element.

[I subjoin a list of Eskimo animal tales, which is, I believe, complete. The occurrence of the tales is indicated by the signs used by Rink to designate the various divisions of the Eskimo: G=Greenland; Ge=East Greenland; C=Central Regions; L=Labrador; M=Mackenzie delta; W=Western. To these I have added H for Hudson Bay and S for Smith Sound. The tales from the Central Regions and Smith Sound not followed by a reference are unpublished. The books referred to are: Rink, *Eskimoiske Eventyr og Sagn*; Rink, *Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo* (designated as *Rink*); Holm, *Sagn og Fortaellinger fra Angmagssalik*; Boas, *The Central Eskimo, Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*; Turner, *The Hudson Bay Eskimo, Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*; *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, ii. (Boas and Rink), vii., ix. (Boas); J. Murdoch in *American Naturalist*, 1886.]

I. ANIMAL TALES PROPER.

- The Duck and the Ptarmigan. Ge: Holm, p. 83.
- The Owl and the Raven. C: Boas, p. 641; *Folk-Lore*, vii. p. 49; S.
- The Snowbird and the Raven. S.
- The Raven and the Geese. G: *Eventyr og Sagn*, i. p. 88; S.
- The Walrus and the Swordfish. S.
- The Owl and the Snowbird. C: *Folk-Lore*, x. p. 110.
- The Owl and the Lemming. C: *Folk-Lore*, x. p. 111.
- The Lemming and the Fox. C: *Folk-Lore*, ii. p. 129.
- The Lemming and the Fox. C, L: *Folk-Lore*, x. p. 111.
- The Lemming. C, L: *Folk-Lore*, x. p. 112.
- The Raven's Song. C: *Folk-Lore*, vii. p. 48.
- The Singing Fox. C: *Folk-Lore*, x. p. 110.
- The Raven with the Bone. S.
- The Dying Raven. C.
- The Talking Bird. G: *Eventyr og Sagn*, ii. p. 118.
- The Visiting Animals. G: Rink, p. 450.
- The Revenging Animals. G: Rink, p. 456.
- The Raven and the Gull. C: *Folk-Lore*, ii. p. 128; S; G: Rink, p. 451.
- The Talking Fishes. G: *Eventyr og Sagn*, ii. p. 119.

II. TALES CONTAINING A HUMAN-ANIMAL MARRIAGE.

- A Tale about Two Girls. G: Rink, p. 126; S; L: H. I. Smith, *Folk-Lore*, vii. p. 210.

A Woman who was mated with a Dog. G: Rink, p. 471; S; C: Boas, p. 637, *Folk-Lore*, ii. p. 124; W: Murdoch.

Sedna and the Fulmar. C: Boas, p. 583, *Folk-Lore*, ii. p. 127.

The Lost Daughter. G: Rink, p. 186.

The Children of a Woman and a Shark. G: *Eventyr og Sagn*, ii. p. 74 (cf. also Rink, p. 470).

The Faithless Wife. G: Rink, p. 143; [S]; H: Turner, p. 264.

Ititaujang. G: Rink, p. 145; S; C: Boas, p. 615.

III. MISCELLANEOUS.

The Blind Man who recovered his Sight. G: Rink, p. 99; C: Boas, p. 625; S.

[The Woman who became a Raven. C.]

Avigiatsiak. G: Rink, p. 450.

The Reindeer and the Animal with the Iron Tail. Ge: Holm, p. 84.

[The Bear a Woman's Son. C: Boas, p. 638; S.]

[The Sun and Moon. G: Rink, p. 236.]

IV. MEN TURNED INTO ANIMALS.

V. MEN ASSUMING BY MAGIC THE FORM OF ANIMALS.

VI. ANIMALS APPEARING AS ANIMALS.

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